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NEWS

A QUESTIONABLE SAINT

BY [KENNETH L. WOODWARD](#) ON 1/12/92 AT 7:00 PM

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NEWS

To his followers, his life was shaped by God, his every pronouncement a source of divinely revealed instruction. To his critics, he was a proud, ill-tempered spiritual elitist who privately sneered at popes and encouraged a posthumous cult to himself. Whatever he was, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, the Spanish founder of Opus Dei ("The Work of God"), a powerful and secretive international association of 75,000 Roman Catholics, is on his way to being declared a saint. Already, say Opus Dei officials, all hotel rooms in Rome are booked for next May 17, when Pope John Paul II is scheduled to beatify Escriva, in St. Peter's Square.

For most candidates, the journey to canonization takes at least 50 years; for some, centuries. But thanks to the organization he left behind, Escriva, who died in 1975, is on track to set a modern record for swift recognition as a saint. Based on materials worked up by a team of Opus Dei priests, John Paul II declared Escriva "heroically virtuous" in April 1990; 15 months later a miraculous healing-- authenticated, in part, by Opus Dei doctors--was attributed to his intercession. "The Father," as Escriva chose to be addressed, now needs only a second posthumous miracle to move from beatification to final canonization.

The ease and speed with which he has moved through the normally meticulous process is now raising doubts. Canonization has been simplified in recent years; there is, for example, no longer a devil's advocate systematically to challenge a candidate's claim to holiness. Thus, say some Vatican officials, Opus Dei has been able to use its influence to manipulate the church's saint-making system for the benefit of its founder.

Understandably, Opus Dei wants Escriva canonized as soon as possible. The Jesuits and other orders have justified similar claims for their own founders and Opus Dei, founded in Spain in 1928, wants to join that elite circle. But Opus Dei is something unique in the church: an association of OPUS DEI clergy and laity operating under its own bishop in Rome. Only about 1,500 members are priests. Of the rest, leadership is exercised by a core of celibate laymen and -women, called numeraries, who promise lifelong chastity and obedience. They live in sexually segregated communities while pursuing secular careers.

Critics of Opus Dei are bothered by what they see as its secrecy, its air of spiritual exclusivity and a rigid orthodoxy that precludes study of many mainstream Catholic theologians. Membership lists are not made public, nor do most individuals identify themselves as Opus Dei unless pressed. But Opus Dei has the enthusiastic backing of John Paul II, who likes its highly conservative theology and unquestioned obedience to the Holy See. His own press secretary, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, is a member, as is Dr. Raffaello Cortesini, a heart surgeon who heads the medical board that reviews potential miracles for the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Even some Opus Dei sympathizers, like retired Cardinal Silvio Oddi, 80, who served the Vatican for decades in key posts, believe the push to make Escriva a saint has done Opus Dei "more harm than good. " Although bishops are reluctant to criticize Opus Dei openly, says Oddi, many are "very displeased" by the rush to judgment and see "no need for the immediate beatification of their founder."

Far more serious are recent charges that Opus Dei prevented critics of Escriva from testifying at church tribunals called to investigate his life. Opus Dei officials insist that 11 critics were heard among the 92 witnesses. But several former members have told NEWSWEEK that they

were refused a hearing. One of them, Maria del Carmen Tapia, a numerary for 18 years who worked directly with Escriva in Rome, claims the father had "no respect" for Popes John XXIII and Paul VI and regarded Opus Dei as "above the church in holiness." Tapia, who now works at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says that Escriva warned members that when they died they would not be judged by what kind of Catholics they had been, but rather that "we would have to give account to God for having met" Escriva.

Miguel Fisac, 78, a respected Spanish architect also tried but failed to give testimony about Escriva, whom he knew for 20 years. "He is not the figure they presented to the public," says Fisac, whose family helped Escriva flee Spain during the civil war. He remembers Escriva as a "man who spoke badly about everyone."

In a NEWSWEEK interview, more damning accusations were made by Father Vladimir Feltzman, who resigned from Opus Dei in 1985 after 22 years. He is now an aide to Cardinal Basil Hume, England's Roman Catholic primate. According to Feltzman, Escriva feared human sexuality, believed everything he wrote "came from God," possessed "a filthy temper" and even defended Adolf Hitler. "He told me that Hitler had been unjustly accused of killing 6 million Jews," Feltzman says. "In fact he had killed only 4 million. That stuck in my mind."

Feltzman claims that Escriva was so despondent over the outcome of Vatican Council II that he and his successor, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, "went to Greece in 1967 to see if he could bring Opus Dei into the Greek Orthodox Church. Escriva thought the [Catholic] church was a shambles and that the Orthodox might be the salvation of himself and of Opus Dei as the faithful remnant."

Msgr. Flavio Capucci, the Opus Dei priest in charge of Escriva's cause, insists that "all objections have been profoundly studied and satisfactorily resolved." Although Capucci acknowledges del Portillo's trip to Greece, he says the Father had no intention of abandoning Rome.

While Escriva's cause is moving swiftly, it has taken some curious turns. Normally, to assess potential saints the Vatican appoints "consultors" who come from the candidate's homeland. Curiously, eight of Escriva's nine judges were Italian--a sign, say critics, that the congregation wanted to avoid Spanish theologians, many of whom are known to oppose Opus Dei. Also, Opus Dei has refused to let outsiders see the material on which Escriva's "heroic virtues" were judged--an unprecedented act of secrecy, say priests familiar with the process.

Opus Dei officials argue that because Escriva was an international figure and lived in Rome, there was no need to have Spanish judges. But these officials have also claimed that Escriva's cause had been unanimously approved. However, NEWSWEEK has learned that two of the

judges, Msgr. Luigi De Magistris, deputy head of the Vatican's Holy Penitentiary, and Msgr. Justo Fernandez Alonso, rector of the Spanish national church in Rome, did not approve the cause. In fact, one of the dissenters reportedly wrote that beatifying Escriva could cause the church "grave public scandal."

The pope can reconsider Escriva's claims to sanctity and the way his cause was handled for the sake of preserving the credibility of the saint-making system in the eyes of the faithful. But the likeliest outcome is that, come May, Escriva will be declared "Blessed Josemaria" and worthy of public veneration.

Founded in 1928 by Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer (left), Opus Dei has grown into a powerful but secretive Catholic organization.

The group claims 75,000 members worldwide: 30,000 in Spain, 30,000 in Latin America.

Though not known for scholarship, Opus Dei operates the University of Navarre in Spain, Piura in Peru, Sabana in Colombia, Panamerican in Mexico and the Roman Athenaeum in Rome.

Granted official recognition by the Vatican after World War II, Opus Dei became the church's only "personal prelature" in 1982, reporting through a bishop to the pope.

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